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## CONTENTS

The misconceptions about Iceland  
- The origin of the name Iceland  
- The reason for the settlement of Iceland - The country and its climate - Form of government in the Free State - Some unique achievements in the Free State - Foreign rule and independence - From isolation to the world highways - Social conditions - Art and learning - Sport in Iceland - The present form of government - International relations - Icelandic-American relations Fish and foreign trade



A view from Reykjavik

# ICELAND'S UNIQUE HISTORY AND CULTURE

BY

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Foto (Ed) Wied

## The misconceptions about Iceland

During the 'thirties the well-known British publisher, Sir Stanley Unwin, decided to spend his holidays in Iceland. When he told his friends about his intention several of them asked him, greatly surprised, whatever makes you want to go to that cold and remote country? To them the name Iceland suggested a desolate, cold and snow-covered island which would be one of the last places a tourist would want to visit on his holidays.

Sir Stanley's friends, as most other people, did not know much about Iceland, but had in their mind a stereotyped idea of the country, conditioned by the name Iceland.

Two contemporary factors have done more than anything else to introduce Iceland to the peoples of the world. The former is the regular weather report read over the radio and television every day, making Iceland famous, if not notorious for the high and low pressure areas conditioning the weather in other more populated areas of the Atlantic region; the latter is the occupation of Iceland during the second world war, followed by the NATO-base at Keflavík after the war.

But weather-reports and soldiering are probably not the best medium to spread knowledge about a country like Iceland.

The stereotype of an icy, snow-covered and desolate country is still very much associated with the name Iceland.

But little as Iceland is known throughout the world today, the general knowledge about the country, its people and culture was greatly less and grossly more inaccurate during the Middle Ages.

During the 15th century a trend of publishing travelogues and descriptions of Iceland abroad was started. To begin with these descriptions were included in larger volumes on the Northern countries, but later separate volumes were published about Iceland. In these early books on Iceland the country is called Thule, Island or Islandia, and during the 15th and 16th century, judged by these books, it was a common belief that in Iceland there was an opening down to hell particularly through Mt. Hekla, and that the fires in hell would occasionally be visible in Iceland as they broke up in pillars of flame and smoke.

One of the most notorious of these early tales from Iceland is the travelogue of Martiniere, first published in Paris in 1671, and later reprinted several times and translated into many languages.

Martiniere, who probably never went to Iceland, tells his readers that the Icelanders live in caves which they have chipped into the mountains, and that all of them are witches who worship the devil. Their main occupation is fishing and according to Martiniere the Icelanders swear endlessly, and the more they swear before they go to sea the more fish they catch. He continues and says that the witchcraft of the Icelanders is such that they can tell foreign visitors what is happening at their far away homes and that they can command the winds and in fact do sell foreign captains wind for their sails at exorbitant prices.

All these misconceptions about Iceland were mostly due to the country's isolation through several centuries, and it is only in recent years that enlightened people throughout the world are beginning to know more about Iceland.

A view from REYKJAVIK (Smoky Bay), the capital of Iceland, which was granted its municipal rights on 18th August, 1786.  
Today about 40 per cent. of the population lives in Reykjavík





Above: A panorama from THINGVÖLLUR, where the Icelandic ALTHING (Parliament) and the Free State was established in 930; Christianity declared the official religion of the Icelanders in the year 1000; and the Icelandic Republic founded in 1944

Right: A statue of INGOLFUR ARNARSON, the first permanent settler of Iceland, who came there in 874

## The origin of the name Iceland

Undoubtedly, there is a great deal of truth in the statement by Sir Julian Huxley, that Iceland is situated on the edge of the culturally habitable world.

But although the northernmost part of Iceland touches the Arctic Circle, the climate is far from being as severe as the name Iceland suggests. As a matter of fact, Sir William Craige, the well-known lexicographer, stated truly enough in an article about the Icelandic Sagas that "Iceland owed its name to an accident". And indeed, this was an Icelandic weather-accident!

It so happened when one of the early Scandinavian visitors, HRAFNA-FLOKI, climbed one day to a mountain-top in Iceland before his departure from the country, that he saw a rare sight—an accident happening in Iceland perhaps once in a lifetime—of icebergs drifting in the fjord beyond. There and then he got the idea of calling the country Iceland. Previously the island had been referred to as THULE, SNÆLAND AND GARDARS-HOLMI.

When back in Norway HRAFNA-FLOKI said the country was totally uninhabitable because of its severe climate and the bareness of the island. One of his companions told just the opposite story,



maintaining that the country was a wonderful place in which butter dripped from every blade of grass. Another of his companions took the more moderate view, and told both of the good and bad things one meets in Iceland, giving nevertheless, on the whole, a favourable description of the country.

## The reason for the settlement of Iceland

History tells us that there have always been among the European nations individuals and groups of people imbued with the spirit of adventure, the desire to know what is beyond the horizon, and with the love of freedom.

The settlement of Iceland is directly related to this spirit of adventure, this desire to know what is beyond the horizon, this love of freedom.

Down the ages when some of the religious groups in England and France found life intolerable in their home countries, they sailed westward to escape persecution, to seek new homes and populated the Americas.

But a long time before the European settlement of America, some Irish monks referred to as PAPAR in the Icelandic sagas, had a similar westward drive. In about 800 A.D. these monks sailed westward, to the uninhabited island situated just at the edge of the arctic circle. There they sought solitude and peace to worship their God.

With the Scandinavian settlement of Iceland the westward drive, stimulated by the spirit of adventure and the love of freedom, became more apparent reason for the settlement.

Shortly before the permanent Norwegian settlement of Iceland began in 874, there had been a long struggle for power among the petty Kings, earls and chieftains of the different regions in Norway. King Harold the Fairhair, so named because he had sworn not to cut his hair until he had complete command of all Norway, fought several battles with the other smaller Kings and Chief-

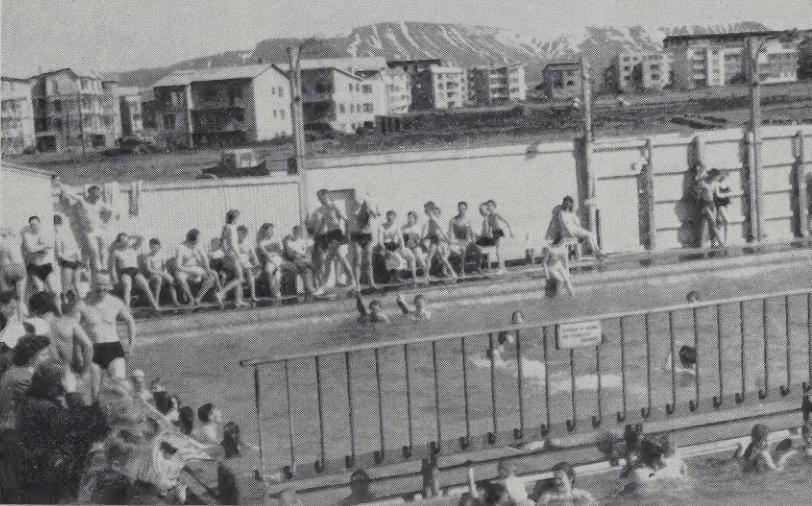
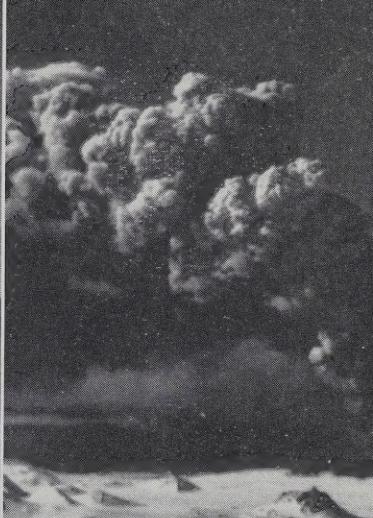
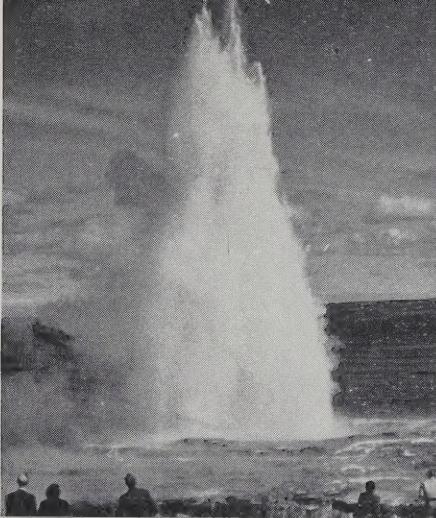
tains and finally had a victory at the battle of *Hafursfjordur* in 872. His opponents had the option of submitting to King Harold or leaving the country.

Many of them preferred to leave Norway rather than accept King Harold as an absolute monarch. Some sailed to Britain, primarily to the Hebrides and Orkney Islands, Scotland and Ireland, but others went direct to Iceland, the first permanent settler being *Ingolfur Arnarson*, who took land in Iceland in 874.

When King Harold the Fairhair conquered the Orkney Islands in 890 as a countermeasure against the frequent raids on his country by his former countrymen who had taken refuge in the islands after 872, and when simultaneously the rule of the Vikings who had settled both in Ireland and on the Scottish coast, began to break up, there appears to have flared up among those men an interest in settling in the free and almost uninhabited Iceland.

All these settlers, as well as those coming direct from Norway, took with them their families, servants and slaves, the latter being mostly freeborn captives of battle who gained their freedom after some time in Iceland. To take an example, one of the slaves brought to Iceland was *Melkorka*, the daughter of *Myr-Kjartan*, King of Ireland, whom *Höskuldur Dalakollsson* took with him to Iceland after buying her as a slave captive of war from *Gilli inn Gerski*. *Höskuldur* had a son by *Melkorka*, the boy being called *Ólafur Pá*. In his time he was one of the most prominent men in Iceland, and to him *Myr-Kjartan* later offered the Kingdom of Ireland after his death. But as we are told in one of the gems of the Icelandic Sagas, *Laxdaela*, *Óafur Pa* declined with the wise observation that he would rather choose the friendship of his relatives in Ireland than a throne which some of them would claim to have more right to than he.

During the 9th and 10th centuries the settlement of Iceland was completed



The volcanic activities of Iceland are responsible for such spectacles as the Great Geyser (top left), and Mt. Hekla (top right), which last erupted in 1947. The swimming pools (centre) as well as the houses are heated by the hot water from the geysers, and the greenhouses (bottom), where the Icelanders grow tropical, semi-tropical fruits and vegetables, are also heated by the same source.

and the original stock was of Norwegian and Celtic descent, it being estimated that about 70 per cent. of the original settlers were of Scandinavian descent and about 30 per cent. of Celtic origin; but it may very well be that the Celtic element is even stronger.

Contrary to common belief, there were no, and never have been, any Eskimos living in Iceland, as Iceland was totally uninhabited when the Irish monks went there; the Papar were the only human inhabitants of the country when the Scandinavian settlement began.

## The country and its climate

Although the northernmost part of Iceland touches the Arctic Circle, the climate is relatively temperate. The country is almost surrounded by a warm current branching from the main Gulf Stream, and the average temperature at Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, is 11°C. (52°F.) in July, but—1°C. (30°F.) in January.

The size of Iceland is about 103,000 Km<sup>2</sup> (39,900 square miles); from south to north the longest line is about 300 km. (190 miles), whereas from east to west the longest distance is about 500 km. (300 miles); the coastline is about 6,000 km. (3,700 miles) and Iceland's northernmost point is at 66° 32' Northern latitude.

The closest neighbours of Iceland are the Greenlanders, the Faroees and the Scots. Greenland is 278 km. (190 miles) distance from Iceland, the Faroe Islands 400 km. (250 miles) and Scotland 800 km. (500 miles). The distance from Iceland to London is 1,177 st. miles and to New York 2,593 st. miles.

Geologically Iceland is very young. Her interior consists largely of uninhabitable mountain plateaux, glaciers, lava fields, rivers and lakes, the highest mountain being HVANNADALSHNÚKUR, which is 2,119 meters high (6,950 feet). The coastline is highly irregular, deeply

indented by bays and fjords which abound in all kinds of demersal fish.

Iceland is really the geologist's paradise. There he can see with his own eyes what he reads about geological formations in his textbooks. On this point, Mr. Peter Smith, a member of the Imperial College Icelandic Expedition of 1958, had this to say in his article in the *Rochdale Observer* of 31st January, 1959:

"The interior of the island, with its vast deserts of lava and ice, is almost uninhabited. Central Iceland is thus the paradise of the explorer with an interest in geology, glaciology, or any other applied geographic science."

The well-known British author, Eric Linklater, describes Iceland with greater literary metaphor in his interesting book *The Ultimate Viking*. He says:

"Iceland's magnificently tormented landscape is the precipitation, initially, of submarine volcanic explosions a degree or two south of the Arctic Circle. Though larger than Ireland, little of its land except the coastal fringe is habitable. The greater part is a rugged desert between two and three thousand feet high, with mountains that rise to nearly 7,000 feet; and from their savage slopes lofty ice-fields descend to black lava barrens that its still active volcanoes have thrown out. Vatnajökull, the largest of the ice-fields, is as big as Corsica, and there are between thirty and forty lesser fields . . . There are several thousand hot springs, most of them small and gentle, but some exuberant. Stóri Geysir, the Great Spouter, has acquired a general renown and given its name to all such watery eruptions.

The landscape varies from infinite desolation to majestic grandeur . . ."

Linklater also says:

"The visitor will first be impressed by the extraordinary cohabitation of heat and cold, of ice and flame. Instinctively one associates volcanic eruption with hot countries: with Sicily and Martinique, with Krakatoa and Japan. But in Iceland, under the Arctic Circle, there have been in the last thousand years some eighty eruptions from twenty-five volcanoes, and here and there the land is split by the gigantic fissures of earthquake".

Still another English gentleman of letters, the publisher Sir Stanley Unwin, who knows Iceland well, described the

country from yet another point of interest:

"Iceland is . . . a paradise for anglers, bird lovers, botanists and geologists. It is an ideal resort for the young and healthy who have still a few drops of Viking blood in their veins. Above all, it appeals to those who love an open air life".

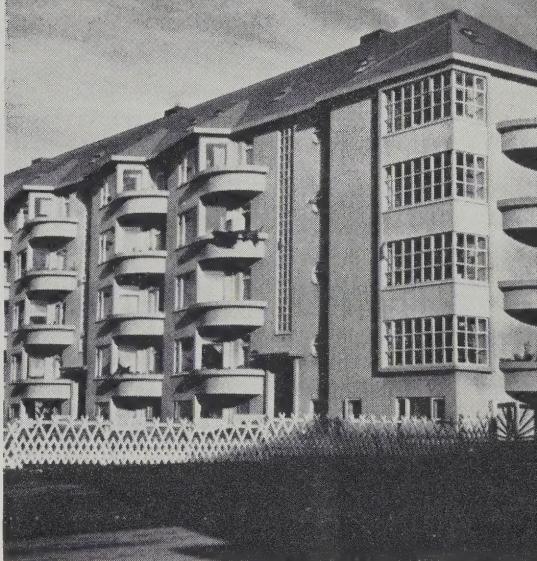
Only the lowland around the shores is inhabited, the largest part of it being in the south-western region of Iceland, where we also find the majority of the population. But from the several fjords great valleys run deep into the surrounding highland, forming in many places very good conditions for farming. The population lives almost entirely on the lowlands of the coastal fringe, largely in small towns and villages close to the less populated farming areas.

## **Form of Government in the Free State**

The early settlers had come to Iceland in their search for the freedom which they had lost to Harold the Fairhair. And, indeed, they found it in Iceland. Even those who came in captivity as slaves were soon set free. True to their ideals the Icelanders founded a most interesting Free State and a Parliament in 930, which has been called "the Grandmother of Parliaments".

The first settlers took possession of large tracts of land. Later they divided them among their relatives, friends and followers. In most districts the early settlers and their descendants were the leaders of the people, settled their disputes and were the actual guardians of peace. The first Government and judiciary in Iceland were in the hands of these chiefs, each serving his settlement area, and it was upon their initiative and

Housing in Iceland, old and new. Since the turn of the century the Icelanders have been completely rehoused. Before they used to live in the turf-and-mud houses as shown in the centre picture, but now they live in modern concrete houses as shown by the top and bottom pictures. These new houses are centrally heated by the water from the hot springs.



authority that a man named *Ulfjotur* was sent abroad to prepare a code of law for Iceland. He returned from Norway in 927. At Thingvöllur in 930 his code of law was accepted with little modification and the Icelandic *Free State* established.

According to the *Saga of the Icelanders*, by Ari THORGILSSON (1067-1148) the parliament at THINGVOLLUR in 930 was not the first assembly in Iceland. Previously THORSTEINN INGOLFSSON, the son of INGOLFUR ARNARSON, the first permanent settler in Iceland, had established an assembly at KJALARNEs for his district. Other district assemblies for legislation and judicial administration had also been established before 930 and the experience gained by those district assemblies was probably drawn on when the code of ULFLJOTUR was finally agreed upon in a modified form in 930 as the law of all the land.

The Free State consisted of 36 (later 39) local districts or divisions. These districts were called *godord*. Each of these *godord* was represented in the Parliament by one man called *godi*. But the *godord*, or constituency and judicial division, was not necessarily a limited geographical area. The people could themselves indicate which *godord* they wished to belong to and decide which *godi* to follow and support.

The Parliament assembled at Thingvöllur and here all the *godar* came with their followers and many of their relatives. The meeting of the Parliament was therefore not only a political event but a great social occasion. Besides the political activities peculiar to the Parliament, games and sports were pursued, poetry and stories recited, marriages arranged between the sons and daughters of the leading men.

The Parliament had two main functions. First, it was a legislative assembly. Secondly, it functioned as the supreme judicial institution in the country. As far as executive power is concerned that was not in the hands of the Parliament but really in the hands of each individual

godi in his district. Thus in 930, or more than seven and a half centuries before the birth of Baron Montesquieu (1689-1755), who advanced his theory of the division of powers within the state in his *L'Esprit des Lois*, published in 1748, the Icelandic people had actually organized their Free state according to the basic assumptions of the theory of the division of the power of the state.

In one respect the political system in the Free State was highly oligarchic.

Although the *godord* was a public office, it was treated as a private property. It was hereditary, could be transferred to others, bought and sold.

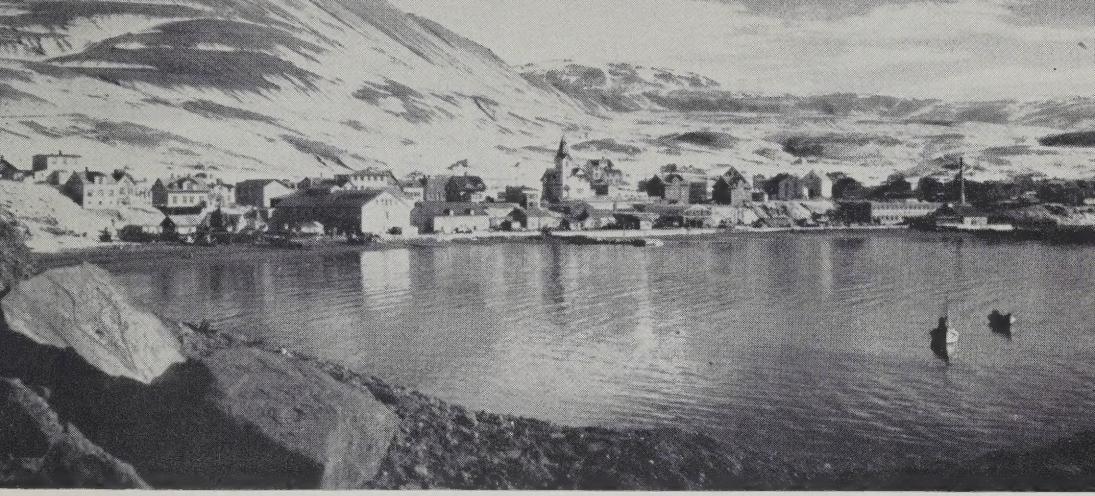
This oligarchic aspect of the political system in the Free State was perhaps the main cause of its downfall. As time went on the *godord* gradually passed into the hands of a few rich families who later fought for power. This sanguinary struggle was later utilized by the King of Norway, Hakon Hakonarson, who had the ambition to extend his sovereignty to Iceland—an ambition that materialized in 1262.

## **Some unique achievements in the Free State**

The foundation of the Free State with its division of power and the Icelandic Parliament in 930 has been heralded as a unique political achievement in Europe at that time. And the Parliament was called "the Grandmother of Parliaments" by the British Envoy at the millenary celebration of the Althing in 1930.

But the Icelanders of the Free State period also made some other unique achievements, notably in the field of literature, discoveries and navigation.

In the literary field, they enriched the world's literature by writing the famous *Sagas*, 40 in number, as well as the *Heimskringla* and the *Eddas*. These literary achievements stand out as a unique contribution to European literature at that time.



The Co-operative Movement in Iceland is, proportionately speaking, one of the strongest in the world. The first society was established in 1882 at the northern village HÚSAVIK, shown above, whereas the Co-operative Federation, SIS, was established in 1902

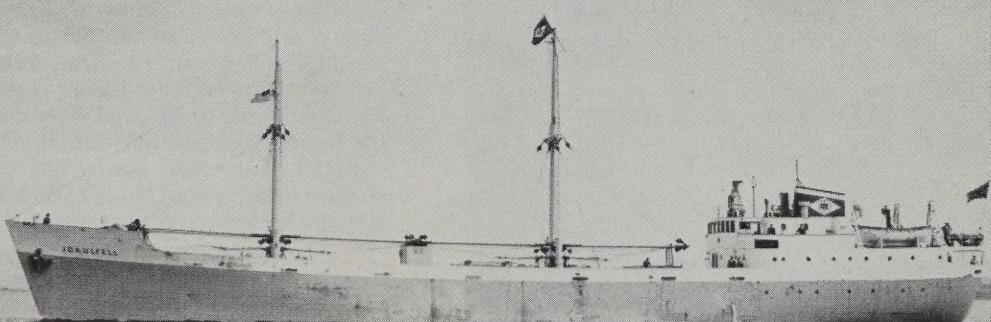
The Sagas are mostly family histories recording the deeds of the early settlers of Iceland and their ancestors. Most of the events recorded take place between the years 930-1030, but a few before and others later than that. None of these stories were written down until after 1117, when the age of writing begins in Iceland. Then the code of law of the Free State was written down. Until that time the law only lived in the memories of the members of the Althing, and the lögréttumadur (law-reciter) was specially selected for three years at a time in order to recite the laws as they were at every Althing.

Similarly the Sagas lived in the memory of the story-tellers and their many listeners, and thus are believed to have reached the literary geniuses that later wrote them down on skin.

It is believed that the first of the Sagas, the Saga of the Icelanders, was written by Ari the learned in about 1122-1133, whereas Snorri Sturluson is believed to have written the Saga of Egill in about 1225.

The skin manuscripts of the Sagas were transported from Iceland, mostly to Denmark, by Scandinavian book collectors. The most active collector of

Iceland is highly dependent on her tramp-ships for bringing in the necessities from abroad and taking the Icelandic products to the foreign markets. Traditionally Britain, Denmark, Germany and Spain were the best customers of Iceland, but now Russia, the East European countries and the United States are Iceland's best customers. Below: A tramp-ship owned by the Co-operative Movement



books and manuscripts was the Icelander, Professor Arni Magnússon, who lived in Copenhagen in the late 17th and early 18th century. Much of his valuable collection of printed books was destroyed in a flaming fire in 1728 when his library in Copenhagen burned to ashes, but fortunately only a little part of his manuscripts perished. Most of the remaining skin manuscripts of the Sagas that survived in the fire are now in the University library in Copenhagen and Icelandic and Danish authorities have from time to time been discussing the possibility of returning them to their country of origin.

In the field of exploration the Icelanders of the Free State period made two great achievements. First, the discovery of Greenland by *Erik the Red* in the year 985. And secondly, the discovery of America by *Leif Erikson*, called the Lucky, in the year 1000, or almost 500 years before Columbus came there.

*Greenland*, Erik so named the huge glacial country north west of Iceland in order to attract people from Iceland to settle there, whereas his son, Leif, named America *Vineland the good*, or the good land of the vine, because of great and delicious berries (believed to be grapes) which he found there.

The Icelandic Sagas record altogether four trips to America during this early period.

In the *Saga of Erik the Red* we are told that two years after Leif the Lucky found America a few of his friends and relatives desired to visit the fragrant land of which Leif the Lucky spoke so well. Altogether 140 men and women sailed from Greenland, probably in 1002, seeking "Vineland the good." Their leader was *THORFINNUR KARLSEFNI*, who was married to *GUDRIDUR*, daughter of Erik the Red.

During their first winter in America *THORFINNUR* had a son by *GUDRIDUR*,

the boy being called *SNORRI KARLSEFNI*. He is most likely the first white man being born in America and was three years old when his parents took him back to Greenland after hostilities with the Indians made it difficult for them to stay on in America.

*THORFINNUR* went to Iceland with his family and lived at *GLAUMBÆ* in Iceland till the end of his days, as did *SNORRI*, his son.

An interesting achievement in the Free State was also the application of arbitration to a dispute over religion in the year 1000 which threatened Iceland with a civil war. Both the Christians and the believers in ASA-faith agreed to have an arbitrator, *Thor geir Ljósvetningagodi*, proclaim whether or not the religion in Iceland should be Christianity or Asa-faith. His sentence was, that Christianity should be the official religion of Iceland, but those who found it difficult to turn their back on *Odinn* and *Thor* and the other heathen Asa-gods, should be allowed to continue their worship of them privately. Consequently a heathen person might accept the Christian faith formally and openly, but would revert to *Odinn* and *Thor* privately whenever special need required an appeal to the gods of war rather than the god of peace.

Relatively soon, all the Icelanders accepted nevertheless the Christian faith, but it appears as if they accepted the church as an institution only on their own terms. The last Catholic Bishop in Iceland before the Reformation of 1550, Jón Arason, lived, for example, a normal family life and took little if any notice of the Scandinavian Archbishop's letters enquiring into the bishop's family life; it has in fact been estimated that today well over half of the Icelandic population can directly or indirectly trace their family tree to Jón Arason, the last Catholic Bishop of Iceland before the reformation.

## Foreign Rule and Independence

Iceland was a Free State until 1262. Then the Norwegian King succeeded in extending his sovereignty to Iceland due to the sanguinary disputes. By the Old Covenant of 1262 the Icelanders agreed to pay a tax to the Norwegian King and he on his part agreed to send regularly several ships a year to Iceland with provisions to be bought and sold. Later, or in 1380-1381, together with Norway, Iceland came under Danish rule.

From the 14th, and down to the 19th century, the history of Iceland is primarily a history of sufferings and misery, famine and poverty caused by epidemics, volcanic eruptions and foreign trade monopoly. The trade monopoly began in 1602 when the Danish King granted exclusive trading rights for a number of years to the highest bidder for the monopoly, often at auctions in Copenhagen. In 1787 this trade monopoly was partly lifted, the King proclaiming that any subject of his could start trading in Iceland; during the Napoleonic Wars the British merchants broke into the monopoly and in 1854 trade in Iceland was proclaimed free to anyone.

At first, after the proclamation of free trade, conditions did not alter greatly, as the former official monopolists were by economic circumstances able to enforce their monopoly. According to the late Icelandic economist, dr. Björn Björnsson, in 1855, 32 out of 58 commercial establishments were owned by foreigners and in 1875 the figure was 37 out of 72.

Eventually, the economic monopoly broke up. Englishmen and Icelanders gradually began to compete with the monopolists. Individual initiative, private enterprise and co-operation went hand in hand. In 1882 the first co-operative society was founded, and in



Above: The symbol: The mountain queen, and below: Women dressed in the national costume

1902 the Co-operative Federation was established which, along with its wholesale and other commercial activities, is the largest business enterprise in Iceland today.

On the political side the main events were that the Parliament had been abolished in the year 1800 by a decree of the Danish monarch, in 1843 reinstated as a consultative assembly, and in 1874 it obtained control of the financial affairs of Iceland.

Since 1904 the country has had a home rule and in 1918 gained her independence again. Then, by an Act of Union, the Parliaments of Denmark and Iceland acknowledged Iceland to be a sovereign state having the king in common with Denmark, and Denmark was to look after Iceland's foreign affairs and coastal jurisdiction. Among other important provisions of that Act was that after 1940 either country could request negotiations regarding the future of the Act of Union. If no agreement be concluded within three years the Parliament of Iceland or Denmark could, by a two-thirds majority, resolve that the Act be cancelled. This resolution would, however, have to be referred to the electorate as a plebiscite.

As Denmark was under German occupation in 1940 no negotiations were possible. The Icelandic Parliament had upon several occasions before 1940 resolved that the Act would not be prolonged, and in 1940 Iceland became a temporary regency until the 17th of June, 1944, when the Icelandic Republic was unanimously proclaimed by the Icelandic Parliament after the matter had been referred to the nation. In the referendum 98.61 per cent. of the electorate participated, 97.35 per cent. voted for the abrogation of the Union Act with Denmark and 95.04 per cent. for the new Constitution of the Icelandic Republic.

The man most commonly accredited with having stimulated most positively the nationalistic feelings of the Icelanders and their desire to regain their

independence is *Jón Sigurðsson* (1811-1879) and it was on his birthday, 17th June, that the Icelandic Republic was established. The acts setting Iceland's trade free in 1854 and giving the Althing control of Iceland's finances in 1874 were largely the result of his political activities.

## **From isolation to the world highways**

Important factors in breaking the isolation of Iceland were the introduction of trawlers at the turn of the century, the telegraphic cable laid to Iceland in 1906, and the establishment of the Icelandic Steamship Company in 1914, which ever since has operated passenger and tramp services between Iceland and Europe and America.

But it was not until the advent of aviation that Iceland finally ceased to be isolated. When the aviators from the United States were experimenting with a round-the-world flight during the years 1920-1930, it became clear that Iceland was a most suitable stepping stone on the flight between America and Europe. This was further demonstrated in 1933 when the Italian, Marshal Balbo, flew direct from Reykjavík to Labrador on his way to America. Colonel Charles A. Lindberg also stopped in Iceland in 1933 when he flew over the Atlantic from New York via Greenland, Iceland and the Shetland Islands to Copenhagen. The German, von Gronau, also stopped in Iceland on his flight over the Atlantic.

By the outbreak of the Second World War it was a well-known fact in informed circles that the strategic importance of Iceland was such that in any conflict in the North Atlantic the utilisation of Iceland as an air and naval base could be decisive. That is why the British landed a force of marines at Reykjavík on the 10th May, 1940.

In 1941 it was felt the British forces were needed elsewhere. A treaty was then concluded between the United



Schooling is compulsory in Iceland from the age of 7-15. Every Icelander who has the ability to study can also obtain further education in specialised schools. Top: The agricultural school at Holar; Second: The Co-operative Business school at Bifröst; Third: The University of Iceland which is open to every qualified Icelander free of charge; Bottom: A primary school at Reykjavik

States and Iceland permitting American Forces to take over from the British the defence activities of Iceland. Simultaneously the U.S.A., as Britain had done before, promised to withdraw all their forces at the end of the war and to recognize Iceland as an independent and sovereign state.

During the Second World War Iceland became a great stepping stone on the flights between America and Europe. By its geographical position it was also the natural Naval Fort in the North Atlantic from which the convoys of the North Atlantic coming from America to England and Russia with the much needed Lend-Lease goods could be protected or destroyed, depending on whether friend or foe had bases in Iceland. From then on there was no question of Iceland being isolated; her strategic importance had thrust her into the highways of the world. Time and again during the Second World War the number of Allied soldiers stationed in Iceland outnumbered the Icelandic population, was in fact often twice that of the Icelandic population.

The foundation and rapid growth of the two Icelandic Air Corporations, The Icelandic Airlines—LOFTLEIDIR and ICELANDAIR—operating air services to Europe and the former also to the United States, has done much to keep Iceland in constant touch with the western world.

As to inland travel, the horse used to be the traditional means of transport for centuries. Now the automobile and aeroplane have replaced it. At the end of 1958 there were, for example, 18,807 automobiles in Iceland, or about one to every nine inhabitants.

## Social conditions

There have been many social changes in Iceland during the last century. As long as the trade monopoly prevailed the nation was in economic serfdom. Prices for Icelandic products were kept ridiculously low, whereas exorbitant

prices were charged for the imported goods and the living standard was very low.

Today there is no sign of this poverty in Iceland. Prosperity came with the independence of the country and the development and utilization of Iceland's resources by the Icelanders themselves.

With (1) the industrial revolution, which is still in full swing in Iceland, (2) individual initiative and development of private enterprise by the Icelanders themselves, (3) the co-operative and labour movement, as well as (4) social-minded political leadership, the Icelanders have steadily advanced in terms of economical, cultural, technical and social achievements.

Together with this development there has been a rapid evolution of economic equality and social justice. Today there is probably less class distinction in Iceland than anywhere else in the world. The highest paid employees in the Icelandic Government, such as Ministers and Members of the Supreme Court, have only just over five times the salary of the lowest paid, the messenger boy. The British scholar, Professor Gwyn Jones, has made an interesting point about this fact in his article, "My Noble Friends the Icelanders", in the Winter 1955-56 issue of the European-Atlantic Review. He says:

"In a country where everyone can trace his ancestry back to his favourite settler in the ninth or early tenth century, how can one man be called an aristocrat and another a wage-slave? To the outsider the nation appears one large family, not free from the strains of family relationships, but always aware of the ties that bind them close."

For one thing, there are no grievous extremes of wealth or poverty. For another, the emphasis is on the man himself, not what he has. There is simply no room for condescension or servility. From Prime Minister to trawler-hand, from the Rector of the University to the smallest farmer, you get the same kind of welcome, the same sort of treatment. You have to meet their standards of personal worth, there is no buying or wheedling your way in".

Few nations have developed the Welfare State to such an extent as Iceland.



Social security has won its day several decades ago. Already by the end of the 19th century health and sickness insurance plans had been adopted, and in 1936 a general insurance plan was enacted. Today it provides for illness, accidents, unemployment and family allowances for every child, as well as for age and disability.

There are about 50 hospitals in Iceland, two Sanatoria for tubercular patients, a rehabilitation centre and other health institutions to care for the 170 thousand people populating Iceland. In late years the birth rate has been higher than in most other European countries, about 28 live births to every 1,000 inhabitants.

Fishing is the most important industry in Iceland, and fish has been the chief export of the country since the 14th century. Today 93.97 per cent. of the total exports of Iceland is fish and fish-products. The Icelandic fishing fleet consists of about 650 motor-boats and 42 deep-sea trawlers, the annual catch of the boats being about 300,000 metric tons, but the catch of the trawlers about 200,000 tons

The divorce rate is relatively low: in late years there has been about one divorce to about 12 marriages, as compared to one in about four in the United States.

Since the reformation in 1550 the greater part of the people belong to the Lutheran Evangelical Church. There are, nevertheless, a few other religious groups in existence and they operate their independent churches.

## **Art and learning**

As far as we know there has always been a relatively great literary interest in Iceland and today the Icelanders' appreciation of the arts is perhaps best compared with that of the Italians.

The greater part of the nation was literate by the end of the 18th century, partly due to the popularity of the Sagas. Today education is compulsory for children between the ages of 7 to 15. Besides elementary, high schools and grammar schools, there are special schools such as the commercial school, the co-operative business school, the industrial school, agricultural schools, the navigation and seamen's school, and several others, most of which are either subsidised or owned by the State or the Municipalities. Every qualified Icelander can go to the University of Iceland and obtain there the education he desires free of charge. Many students at the University also get grants besides the free tuition.

During the second half of the 12th and during the 13th century, many of the *Sagas* were written and during that period the greatest Icelandic writer of all times, SNORRI STURLUSON (d. 1241), wrote his world-renowned *Heimskringla* (a history of the Norwegian Kings up to 1177) and the *Prose Edda* (Norse mythology and technique of poetry), and it is believed that he also wrote the gem *Egilsaga* in about 1225.

Of the religious poets, the greatest names are the 17th century pastor HALLGRIMUR PETURSSON and the clergyman, MATTHIAS JOCHUMSSON (1835-1920), who also wrote plays. The best-known Icelandic novelist today is the Nobel prizewinner (1955), HALLDOR KILJAN LAXNESS (b. 1902), and the most popular poet and playwright is probably DAVID STEFANSSON (b. 1895).

During this century there have been some remarkable achievements in painting (Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jóhannes Kjarval, Jón Stefánsson), sculpture (Einar Jónsson), and in 1950 the National

Theatre was opened and has been operated successfully ever since.

The Icelandic language is the oldest of the modern European tongues. At the time of the settlement of Iceland more than 1,000 years ago, it was spoken in all the Scandinavian countries and at least understood in parts of the British Isles, i.e. the Orkneys and Hebrides, where some of the Norse Vikings settled after the battle of Hafursfjord in 872. Due to the isolation of Iceland and the Icelanders' love of the Sagas, the language has remained practically unchanged until this day.

## **Sport in Iceland**

The most popular physical sport in Iceland is probably swimming, whereas the most popular intellectual sports are chess and bridge. Every Icelander learns to swim nowadays and in the popular Scandinavian swimming contest of 1954 about 25 per cent. of the entire population participated and swam the 200 metres required. Football is also very popular as well as ski-ing and field and track. Mr. Vilhjalmur Einarsson (b. 1934) won the Silver Medal for hop, step and jump at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. But the old Icelandic sport is GLIMA, a special form of wrestling which enjoys popularity but no mass participation. Salmon and trout fishing, as well as mountaineering, are also very popular. The many mountains and the great number of salmon and trout rivers and lakes offer innumerable opportunities for participation in those sports. As to the quality of the rivers, Sir Stanley Unwin has stated:

"To anglers these rivers are the chief attraction of Iceland because they afford some of the best salmon fishing in Europe—and if salmon fishing palls (it never seems to) there are plenty of char and trout in the lakes".

The most famous chess player is the International Grand Master, Mr. Fridrik Ólafsson (b. 1934), who has participated in several international tournaments and, when only 18 years old, became



Until the beginning of this century the Icelanders lived almost entirely on the farms. In 1900, 80.3 per cent. of the population lived in rural districts, but in 1956 the figures had been reversed. 78.8 per cent. lived in towns and villages with more than 300 inhabitants, and only 21.2 per cent. in rural districts.

**Top:** AKUREYRI. **Centre:** the fishing village, WESTMANN ISLANDS. **Bottom:** the fishing village, FLATEYRI



the Scandinavian Chess Champion. Another Icelander, Mr. Baldur Möller, has also twice won the Scandinavian Chess Championship.

## The present form of Government

Iceland has been a democratic Republic since 1944. The President is elected every fourth year by a popular vote in which every Icelander 21 years and older can participate. The power of the President is somewhat limited, as it used to be in France, he having powers similar to the Monarchs in the Scandinavian countries and Great Britain.

The real legislative power rests with the Parliament, which consists of 60 members, 49 of them elected in 8 constituencies on a proportional basis every fourth year, and 11 supplementary members elected proportionally according to the total party vote throughout the country. The real executive power rests with the Cabinet, it being usually a coalition of two or more parties forming the majority in the Parliament.

The present political parties holding seats at the Althing after the elections in October 1959 are:

	Seats	Votes
Independence Party ..	24	33,798
Progressive Party ..	17	21,884
People's Union ..	10	13,621
Social Democratic Party ..	9	12,910

The Independence Party corresponds approximately to the Republican Party in the U.S.A. and the Conservative Party in Britain, although it also resembles the Liberal Party in Britain in many ways. The Progressive Party corresponds approximately to a combination of the Liberal and Co-operative Party of Britain or the Democratic Party in the U.S.A. with a slightly more agrarian emphasis. The Social Democratic Party corresponds approximately to the Social Democratic Parties in the Scandinavian countries with a slightly more professional and middle-class out-

look, whereas the People's Union corresponds approximately to the Bevanites within the British Labour Party, although they also contain communistic elements.

## International relations

Iceland has taken part in all the more important international organizations established after the Second World War. She is a member of the United Nations, the O.E.E.C., the Council of Europe, the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank, the Nordic Council and NATO, and has embassies in the major capitals of Europe and America. Her basic foreign policy has developed through two main stages since 1918. First, the period of neutrality, secondly the period of co-operation with the Western Powers in their defence activities in Europe.

Upon her independence in 1918, Iceland declared that she subscribed to the policy of neutrality and she would have no military forces. This policy of neutrality was scrupulously observed until 1941 when Iceland accepted a proposal that the British would withdraw their occupational forces and the United States bring defence forces into the country. As soon as the United States entered the Second World War Iceland began to be used as a military base by a belligerent state with the consent of the Icelandic Government. Strictly speaking, Iceland could not be considered neutral from then on, although she declined to declare war upon Germany and Japan near the end of the second world war when invited to do so, as a prerequisite for participating in certain talks on post-war international co-operation.

After the war the old policy of neutrality was again waived aside when Iceland became a member of NATO and when in 1951 she consented to have the country used as a military base again.

In 1956 the foreign policy of Iceland was described in a news communiqué



The majestic grandeur of many waterfalls in Iceland is world renowned. They do not only appeal to the æsthetic feelings but are just as much linked with the hopes for a better future and more stable economy, because in these "whitecoals" of Iceland there is enormous and easily harnessable energy on which to build new industries.  
Top right: GULLFOSS.  
Top left: SKOGAFOSS.  
Centre: GODAFOSS.  
Bottom: SALMON FISHING IN ELLIDAÁR

from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Reykjavík in these words:

“... that as in the past friendly relations with all other nations be maintained and that in matters of defence the policy be co-ordinated with the policy of neighbour nations *inter alia* through co-operation in NATO as with its member nations.”

In spite of this basic policy of friendliness with all nations and co-operation within NATO, Iceland has not altogether escaped disputes with other states, the Anglo-Icelandic Fisheries Dispute being the only serious one. The words following of the former Foreign Minister of Iceland, Mr. Bjarni Benediktsson, who today is Iceland's Minister of Justice, in an article in the 1955-56 European Atlantic Review, reflect part of the Icelandic attitude in the dispute with Britain:

“The overwhelming majority of the people of Iceland are eager for co-operation among the North Atlantic Treaty countries. But it is certainly true that the difficulties we have had in our dispute with the United Kingdom has helped the Communist Party in its propaganda. They are able to ask: ‘What use is it being in the Atlantic Community when your best friends turn against you in such an important matter?’...”

Mr. Hermann Jónasson, a former Prime Minister, has similarly stated:

“A nation cannot continue for a long time to be in a political and military alliance with a nation or group of nations who are continually against her vital economic interests.”

Elaborating on Iceland's foreign policy at the 10th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, the present Foreign Minister, Mr. Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson, said:

“The Icelandic people, who are all of one race, have difficulty in understanding any policy or practice of discrimination on account of race. We desire to stand on the side of humanity.”

At the same time he pledged Iceland's support for human rights and freedoms as well as for disarmament, and added that a “United Nations peace force could play a major role” in preserving peace.

With respect to independence movements of several nations the Foreign

Minister said that “my delegation also stands for the principle of the right of self-determination,” and added, “we can never build a peaceful and secure world unless we continue and intensify our fight against poverty, malnutrition and disease in vast areas of the globe.”

To these comments may be added the following words of Iceland's senior Diplomat, Dr. Thor Thors, Iceland's Ambassador to the Americas and the United Nations. At the General Assembly on 5th October, 1959, he declared Iceland's respect for people's rights to self-determination and said:

“My country, Iceland, has lived under colonialism, and we are by heart and mind on the side of those new nations who want their full freedom and sovereignty.”

Later he said, with respect to Iceland's general foreign policy:

“**Being one of the Western democracies, our course most frequently runs parallel with other democratic countries by reason of common ideals, common heritage and similar ways of thinking, similar desires and aspirations of our peoples, similar outlook on life and the same love for freedom.**”

## Icelandic – American relations

One aspect of Iceland's foreign relations has probably received more publicity than anything else in Icelandic diplomacy, because it has time and again been the subject of sensational news in the popular press. This is Icelandic-American relations connected with the NATO-base at Keflavík.

Sometimes the sensational news from Keflavík as presented by the popular press has implied great difficulties in Icelandic-American relations.

The fact is, however, that Icelandic-American relations have on the whole been particularly good. The United States was, for example, the first great power to recognize the sovereignty of the Icelandic Republic. Similarly, when the question of manning the NATO



The big three in Iceland's literature: The historian SNORRI STURLUSON (d. 1241); the poet and playwright DAVID STEFANSSON (b. 1895); and the Nobel prizewinner HALLDOR KILJAN LAXNESS (b. 1902)

bases in Iceland was raised, it was never thought of as a possibility unless the NATO forces would in fact consist of American troops.

It is nevertheless true that the relationship between the Icelanders and the American troops in Iceland has not been without its difficulties. It has caused some grave social and economic problems as a military camp usually does, no matter where it is established, even within the border of the soldier's own State.

But the burning question about the Keflavík base has never been whether American or some other NATO troops should be there; the question has only been whether or not world security did or did not require defence bases in Iceland.

When Iceland joined NATO the membership was accepted on the basis that there would be no military troops in Iceland during peace-time. Consequently during the first two years of Iceland's NATO membership there were in fact no troops in Iceland. Only after the Korean war broke out was it considered essential for world strategy for peace and security that defence forces be established in Iceland. By 1955, before the Suez venture and the Hungarian uprising, world condition was such in the eyes of the Icelandic Government that the troops were not required any longer. Consequently the Government prepared for having them sent away.

But in the eyes of the Icelandic Government the Suez conflict and the

Hungarian uprising jeopardized, for the time being, the development of the previous trend in world affairs for peaceful co-existence. Therefore Iceland withdrew her request that the troops would leave the country. This was done without change in Iceland's basic foreign policy. According to Iceland's spokesmen at the United Nations and declarations by the Foreign Office at Reykjavik, Iceland's foreign policy was and still is that Iceland wants good and peaceful relations with all nations; that the Icelanders will not bear arms against any nation; that there should be military NATO bases in Iceland ONLY if world strategy for peace requires it in the eyes of the Icelanders themselves; and that the right to self-determination of peoples should be respected. Consequently, in a peaceful and secure world, where the principle of peaceful co-existence has been accepted in theory and practice, there will, according to Iceland's often repeated declarations, not be any military troops in the country.

## Fish and foreign trade

In concluding let us remember that fishing is the all-important factor in Iceland's economy. From 93-97 per cent. of her total exports is fish and fish products. With the fish, caught by about 650 motor boats and 42 deep-sea trawlers, Iceland has to pay for all her imports.

Proportionately speaking, Iceland's foreign trade is therefore very high per capita. This was effectively pointed out by Mr. Olafur Thors, Prime Minister of Iceland, in a speech at O.E.E.C. in Paris on 13th December, 1952. He said:

"Of all the countries in the O.E.E.C., and for that matter in the whole world, Iceland is the one which has the biggest foreign trade per capita . . . Our export consists almost

entirely of fish and fish products. It is therefore the fishing industries that finance our foreign trade".

Therefore, Iceland has been very much concerned with fish conservation and with the marketing of fish.

Because of this basic need of the economy of Iceland for good markets of fish and due to the Anglo-Icelandic dispute over the fishery limit, involving from 1952-1956 the landing ban on Icelandic trawlers in British harbours, trade relations have in late years increased greatly between Iceland and the East European countries. Nevertheless, Iceland has kept on being in political and defence alliance with the Western nations.

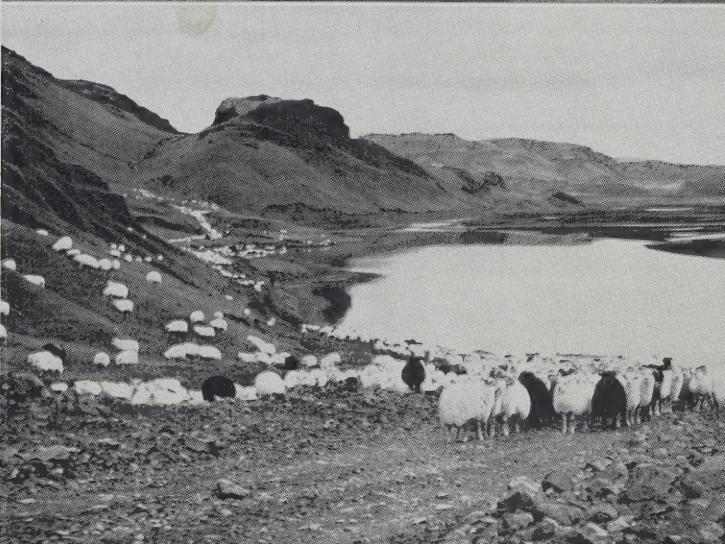
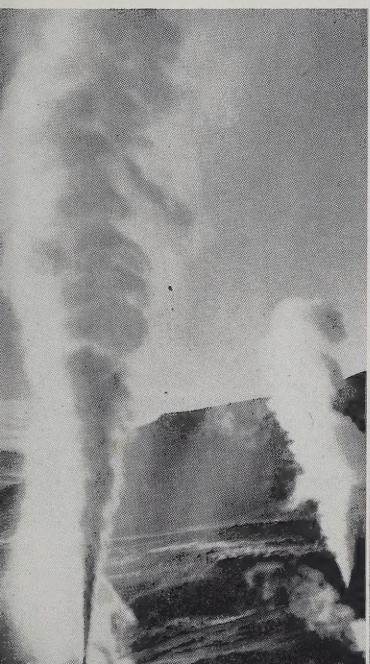
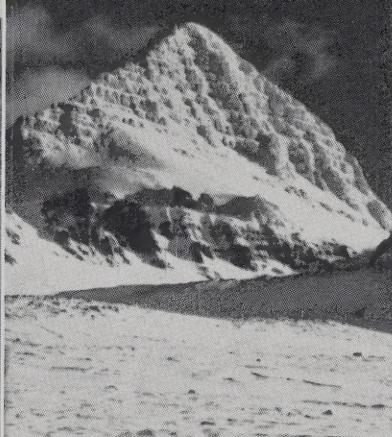
The explanation of this problematical fact is perhaps partly to be found in Iceland's unique history and culture, in her political and literary traditions stemming from the Golden Age of the Free State. The cultural heritage of Iceland with the love of freedom and liberty, and the desire for individual development and achievements, were and still are the most prominent ideological aspirations of the Icelanders. Consequently, they are devoted to the democratic form of Government.

Nevertheless, economic factors as well as geography and territorial security of a State, no less than the ideological aspirations of its people, dictate in the long run its foreign policy.

Therefore Iceland's outlook in world affairs can hardly be expected to be static, but is bound to move with the times on the basis of economic and political reciprocity between Iceland and the States she deals with.

Such dealings are, however, likely to be conditioned by two things: *fish and Iceland's cultural heritage*.

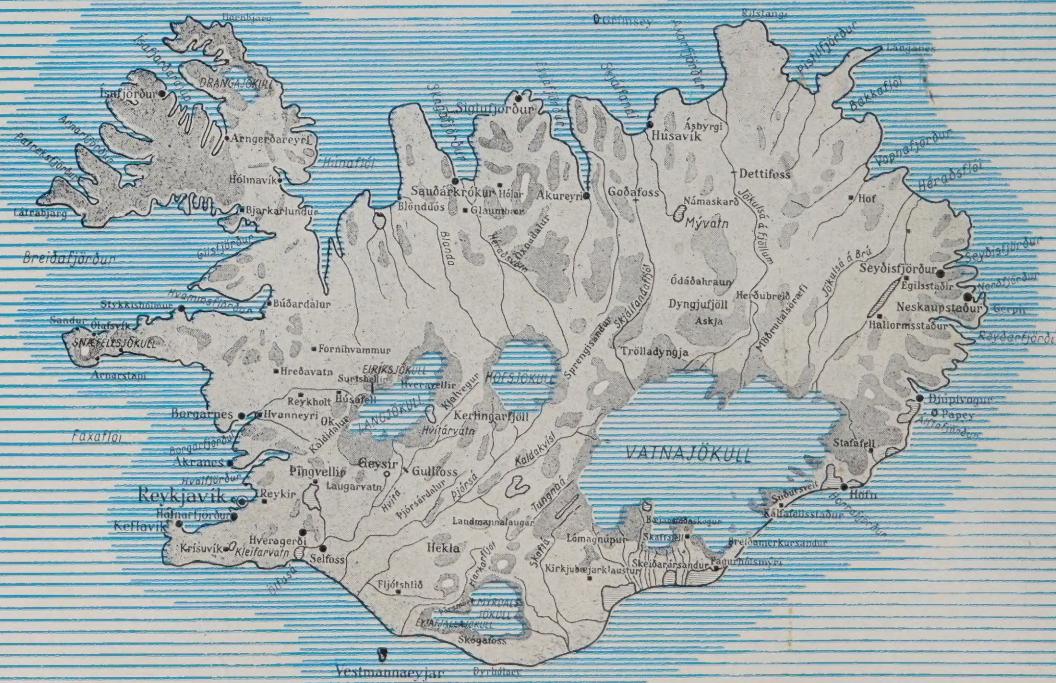
To realize that is to have the key to the understanding of the Icelanders.



The landscape varies from infinite desolation to majestic grandeur



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The contents are based on a series of lectures on Iceland given by the author at the City Literary Institute, London, in February, 1960. Pictures by courtesy of Iceland Tourist Bureau, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Reykjavik, and Federation of Iceland.

1960. Pictures by courtesy of Iceland Tourist Bureau, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Reykjavik, and Federation of Iceland

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